

THE CYSTINE CHAPEL

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According to Webster's Third New International Dictionary, the words SISTINE, CYSTINE and CYSTEINE are pronounced in the same way -- a homonymic fact which overtakes my imagination. The latter two are sulfur-containing amino acids, and ambiguity in spoken English is so real that the preferred dictionary pronunciations are seldom used: CYSTEINE most often becomes a three-syllable word, /sis tay een/, accented on the second syllable so the hearer knows with certainty what the speaker means. In the same fashion, HOMOCYSTEINE and HOMO-CYSTINE are in practice pronounced differently, although dictionary preference is for homonymy, rhyming with SISTINE. Note also BEN-ZENE and BENZINE, where a chemist may speak of "benzine-with-an-I" or "benzene-with-an-E".

I would like to point out some other examples, mainly taken from my own medical vocabulary, where usage changes the pronunciation of homonyms or near-homonyms. I recall the introduction in high school physics to the HYDROMETER (which measures specific gravity) and the HYGROMETER (which measures humidity). In speaking of these objects, the consonant sounds /d/ and /g/ were consistently exaggerated to redefine the pronunciation. Similarly, encountering ABSORPTION and ADSORPTION in high school chemistry, we learned to over-stress the consonant sounds /b/ and /d/. In other uses, AB- and AD- prefixes form antonymic word pairs that trouble the listener. For example, ABDUCTION is the movement of a part away from the center of the body and ADDUCTION is movement toward it. There are ABDUCTOR and ADDUCTOR muscles, and orthopedists frequently say /ay bee duk tor/ or /ay dee duk tor/ to insure delivery of the correct message. The PERINEAL nerves innervate the genitalia and the PERONEAL nerves the feet -- an embarrassment at the least to confuse the two. The solution is to overly stress the second vowel sound as a short /i/ or a long /o/, when in fact the dictionary calls for an unaccented schwa sound for both. DYSPHASIA is difficulty with language and DYSPHAGIA difficulty with swallowing. Ordinarily both are pronounced with a /zh/ as the last consonant sound, but if there is possibility of confusion, the first gets a loud /z/ and the second a forceful /j/. In addition, the chief accent of the word is shifted from the second syllable to the third.

Can others supply examples, probably from specialized fields, in which dictionary preferences for pronunciation are little-used because of troublesome near- or true homonymy?